

# 11 Memoryscapes of the homeland by two generations of British Bangladeshis

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## **Introduction**

In this chapter, we interpret and compare memories of life, landscape and kinship-based socialities in Bangladesh on the part of two generations of British Bangladeshis, namely first-generation immigrants born in Bangladesh but now living in London, and their British-born children. The research material was collected via in-depth interviews with members of the Bangladeshi immigrant community in East London, the major concentration of Bangladeshis in the UK, and in Sylhet, the peripheral, north-eastern region of Bangladesh, from where most of these immigrants originate.

According to Gardner and Mand (2012: 971), the British Bangladeshi community is a ‘transnational community *par excellence*’, notable for the vibrancy of the links which are maintained with Bangladesh, despite the long distance. Such links include continuous exchanges of goods, gifts, ideas and, above all, visits. We interpret these visits and other connections to the Bangladeshi homeland through the lens of memory. We propose the notion of ‘memoryscapes’ (cf. Phillips & Reyes, 2011) to connote the real and tangible, but often nostalgic and idealised, recollections of places, landscapes and people remembered from the distant past of childhood, or from more recent experiences of visits. Beyond the addition of memoryscape to Appadurai’s (1990, 1996) exploration of the various ‘scapes’ which represent contemporary global cultural exchange, other innovative features of this chapter are its cross-generational and gendered comparisons, and its multi-sited fieldwork in London and Bangladesh.

We therefore analyse two ‘memoryscapes’ associated with this long-distance migration and the visits back and forth. The first, for the first generation only, is about memories of their early lives in Bangladesh. For most, this entails nostalgic recollections of childhood in rural Sylhet, but also, for some, more harrowing memories of political struggle and economic hardship which led to the decision to leave. The second memoryscape refers to visits ‘home’, both of the first and the second generation. These visits take place at fairly regular intervals, depending on the family’s financial circumstances, the strength of their transnational ties and the geographical distribution of kin. Annual visits are typical, but they can also take place more, or less, frequently. They fall into a category of mobility known as ‘visiting friends and relatives’ (VFR) but, beyond this kinship and social network function, they can also have a touristic expression, since the journeys are seen as holidays and may involve visiting other parts of Bangladesh in addition to the place of origin. Moreover, some of these trips have an

economic dimension, as opportunities are taken to check on investments in land and housing, and to resolve matters of inheritance.

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In synthesis, we argue that the experiences and practices of VFR mobilities demonstrate that the transnational social field linking London and Bangladesh is highly interactive and performative. Memories are on balance positive, fuelled by nostalgia, the reinforcement of kinship and family solidarity, and a strong sense of connection to the 'homeland'. However, our findings also suggest that the transnational bond between Bangladesh and its London diaspora is at a critical juncture. In particular, disputes around land and properties are threatening the continuation of the British Bangladeshi transnational way of life, and the depth of the relationship between host and home country is in danger of being diluted.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the next section we introduce the reader to the British Bangladeshi community in East London. This is followed by a brief section on the methods used to collect research data. We then review the literature on the intersections between memory, diaspora and visits to the homeland, including justification for our use of the notion of memoryscape. The empirical findings are presented in two parts. The first concentrates on memoryscapes of the first generation, looking back to their pre-migration lives in the homeland. The second part is about visits 'home' and their powerful significance for transnational identities and kinship networks, with comparisons drawn between the generations and between men and women participants. In the conclusion we stress the key findings and their originality, and speculate briefly on the future of British Bangladeshis' relationship with the homeland.

## British Bangladeshis

Although there is a less extensive literature on Bangladeshi migration to Britain than there is on the Indians and Pakistanis, the historical presence of Bengalis, in London especially, is long-established. Already by the 19th and early 20th centuries Bengali seamen, called *lascars*, recruited to work as cooks and deckhands by the East India Company, had jumped ship and set down the roots of their community in degraded housing close to the London docklands. The vast majority of the *lascars* came from Sylhet, the north-eastern region of Bangladesh (then still part of British India), and subsequent chain migration has preserved the link with this region of origin (Adams, 1987; Gardner, 1995).

The Bangladeshi community of East London received a significant numerical boost in the decades immediately after the Second World War, when Britain recruited workers from Commonwealth countries – who were at that time British passport holders – to rebuild infrastructure and work in various industries and services in the fast-growing postwar economy. These early postwar migrant workers were mostly men. However, the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962, designed to control immigration, in many ways had the opposite effect, as it encouraged Bangladeshi men to stay put and to bring over their wives

and families. Investments were made in houses and businesses, the second generation was born, and the ‘myth of return’ (cf. Anwar, 1979) became the complex reality of the community’s attitudes and behaviours. In other words, the notion of return was continually held as an ideology, at the same time as the Bangladeshi families moved towards settling down in Britain, knowing that, in reality, they would probably not return. The contradiction is partly resolved by a generally intense transnational identity and contacts, including regular visits ‘home’. Meantime, the Bangladeshi war of independence (1971) had also contributed to the further inflow of migrants who were escaping the chaos and atrocities of the conflict.

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The Bangladeshi migrant-heritage population in the UK is now well established, with a multi-generational structure. Identified as a separate ethnic category for the first time in the 1981 census, the population has continued to grow rapidly, reaching more than 450,000 in 2011, 222,000 of whom are in London, mainly concentrated in East London where the original focus in Tower Hamlets, near the old dockland area, still exists, alongside an eastward suburban drift towards Ilford and Barking. In the 2011 census, both UK-born and non-UK-born populations of Bangladeshi origin were categorised as ‘Asian British-Bangladeshi’; as a result, contemporary researchers, including ourselves, use the term ‘British Bangladeshi’ in a wider sense regardless of birthplace, citizenship or immigration status.

Despite the fact that Gardner (1995, 2002; also Gardner & Mand, 2012) observed that Bangladeshi migrants in London maintain strong transnational ties with their homeland, there has been little systematic exploration of the memories of the places left behind. Zeitlyn’s recent research (2012, 2015) on Bangladeshi transnational childhoods does include participation in the children’s visits with their families to see their extended kin and places of origin in Bangladesh, and we will summarise this research later in the chapter. We include our own material on children’s homeland visits, in the form of memories of such visits held by adult-age second-generation British Bangladeshis; but we also analyse a fuller spectrum of the VFR phenomenon, comparing the experiences of first- and second-generation visitors to the homeland.

## **Note on methods**

Fieldwork, carried out both in London and Sylhet, consisted mainly of semi-structured interviews but also more informal participation within the community, including on family visits in Bangladesh. The interviews were the responsibility of the first-named author. The second author contributed by shaping the research design and theoretical frameworks, based on previous research on visits to the migrant homeland in other geographic contexts (Christou & King, 2014; King & Lulle, 2015; King *et al.*, 2013). Both authors participated equally in the analysis and interpretation of the interview scripts.

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Prior to conducting the formal interviews, contact was made with potential interviewees via the first author's personal networks within the Bangladeshi community living in East London and at various social, cultural and community events. These initial contacts and preparatory meetings were necessary to gain trust, and set the boundaries and expectations for participating in the research, including following standard ethical procedures of informed consent. Over a six-month period in 2016–17, 30 interviews with first- and second-generation Bangladeshis were carried out in London, followed by another 30 interviews with visiting migrants and their non-migrant relatives in Sylhet during a three-month field trip in 2017. Interviews were more or less evenly distributed across generations and by gender. The first-generation migrants were interviewed in Bangla, the second-generation participants in English. All interviews were subsequently transcribed and those in Bangla translated into English. We use pseudonyms to respect participants' confidentiality.

## **Memoryscapes, diasporic space and visits to the homeland**

In their text *Global Memoryscapes*, Phillips and Reyes (2011: 2) explore the practices of memory as they relate to globalisation – the movement of people, ideas, technologies and discourses across national boundaries and the consequent emergence of new transnational social structures that are not bound by national borders or identities. These authors envision memoryscape as 'a complex landscape upon which memories and memory practices move, come into contact with, and are contested by, other forms of remembrance' (2011: 13). Whilst Phillips and Reyes' book is mainly about public memory, the memories of our participants are personal, private (albeit often shared) and spatially localised.

Our notion of memoryscapes introduces a material, spatio-temporal and aesthetic dimension in which experiences of earlier life-stages or recent visits sited in the diasporic homeland are narrated, often with warm nostalgia, but sometimes laced with tension or disappointment (cf. Christou & King, 2010: 645). In this way, we add memory to the litany of 'scapes' – ethnoscapescapes, ideoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes and mediascapes – specified by Appadurai (1990, 1996) as demonstrative of how media, ideas and travel (to which we add memory) fuel individual and collective imagination in the practice of everyday lives. Representing multiple realities, Appadurai's scapes are fluid and constantly shifting, and completely intertwined with each other, especially when connected to important global processes like international migration. Here the key 'scape' is ethnoscape, which is the result (also in the imagination) of the movement of people across borders and cultures, reshaping those cultures along the way. Appadurai claims that his scapes

are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather . . . they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors . . . [including] intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighbourhoods and families.

(1990: 296)

Migration – especially in the minds of migrants – leaves behind a trail of memories of times and places in the past. Often these memoryscapes are idealised, but for the migrants themselves they are also real and tangible, and refer to the minutiae of places and landscapes, and to the social contexts and relations that inhabit these landscapes of memory. These principles are nicely brought out by Butalia's (2011) chapter in *Global Memoryscapes*, which chronicles an emotional journey undertaken by an elderly Indian Sikh back to his pre-partition village in Pakistan.

Memory, meanwhile, can be regarded as an act of remembering which creates new understandings of both the past and the present (Agnew, 2005: 8). In this chapter we construct Bangladesh as a geographic and psychic space of 'home', or perhaps better, 'homeland', in which that diasporic hearth, especially its landscape and people, is remembered or imagined by many diasporans as a space of familiarity and safety, but by others as a locus of unfamiliarity and disillusionment.

In her classic text *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtah Brah writes that the concept of 'diaspora space' represents 'the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location', as well as 'a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes' (1996: 181). Brah's argument is that diaspora space as a conceptual category is inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are represented as indigenous, as sedentary non-migrants. Brah concludes (1996: 181, her emphasis), 'the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of "staying put"'.

The interwoven notions of diaspora, home and homeland are intricately connected with, and contingent upon, 'memory work'. The diasporic landscape of the homeland and the people 'left behind' hold a particular attraction to migrants and their descendants, and this is what goads them to make repeated return visits, which in turn reshape those memories. As Marschall points out (2017: 6):

The revisit can be a vehicle for the systematic pursuit of memories; an extension of the process of remembering itself; an opportunity for reconstructing one's own past and affirming or reshaping one's identity. As the traveller encounters the old home, memories are recaptured, refreshed and verified; distorted memories are exposed and adjusted; embodied memories are relived through bodily experiences; long-forgotten memories can suddenly resurface and cause deeply emotional reactions; memories may be spontaneously shared with companions. After the journey, memories are re-evaluated, consolidated, synthesized and narrated; in the process, they may be compared and partly merged with other people's memories and perhaps one's own memories from previous journeys.

According to Brah (1996: 182), 'the image of a journey' is 'at the heart of the notion of diaspora'. But then she goes on to more narrowly specify that 'diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots "elsewhere"'. Two important critiques of this statement can be made. The first is the implication that the diasporic journey is inevitably a journey of migration, of settlement and (reflecting the origin of the term 'diaspora') of scattering. We question this assumption on two counts: one, that the journey is only one-way; and two, that the journey ineluctably leads to permanent settlement. There is now a substantial body of recent research which documents the fluidity of diaspora as a social and geographic formation, with evidence of onward migration or 'rediasporisation', and 'counter-diaspora' or

return to the diasporic homeland (see, *inter alia*, Christou & King, 2014; King & Olsson, 2014; Tsuda, 2009; Wessendorf, 2013).

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The second critique of Brah's formulation is to point out that 'diasporic journeys' can be both multi-directional and multi-temporal, including short-term visits. Indeed, visits 'home' are considered a fundamental constitutive element of the Bangladeshi diasporic experience – of being a migrant, or a migrant descendant, long-term settled in a foreign land. In terms of the temporal rhythms of movement, visits to see relatives and friends in the homeland are enfolded within the longer rhythms of lifetime migration and diaspora formation (cf. Williams *et al.*, 2011). Indeed the practice of making regular homeland visits may facilitate the continuance of long-term settlement abroad and abrogate the necessity to confront both the existential dilemma of the migrant ('where do I belong?') and the binary decision of whether to return-migrate.

Ignored in the migration and diaspora literature until relatively recently, visits made by migrants to their countries and communities of origin have now become the focus of a substantial body of empirical research: see Baldassar (2001) for a pioneering ethnographic study of Italo-Australians and Janta *et al.* (2015) for a literature review. As pointed out in our introduction, travel within the diasporic space created by the history and geography of Bangladeshi migration can be classified as part of VFR mobilities. Theoretically, these diaspora-defined visits can be of three types: migrants and their descendants visiting the homeland – the '*desh*'; non-migrants from the homeland visiting their relatives abroad in the diaspora; and diasporans visiting relatives and friends in other diasporic locations outside the homeland. Our analysis in this chapter is limited to homeland visits.

Baldassar (2001: 3) characterises the visit home as a 'secular pilgrimage' of enormous importance to migrants, not only for the first generation, for whom the return travel is to their place or district of birth, but also for the second generation, for whom the journey has a different resonance – a connection to their family's geographical and cultural origins. For the first generation, visits are mainly about reinforcing their Bangladeshi, or more precisely Sylheti, identity, keeping in touch with kin and community, demonstrating their success abroad, checking up on land and property, and perhaps investing in new acquisitions. For the second generation, the homeland visit can be (but is not always) a 'transformatory rite of passage' (Baldassar, 2001: 323) which unveils the ethnoscape of their ancestral past, but also poses soul-searching questions about the exact nature of their hybrid British Bangladeshi identity.

## Memoryscapes of childhood

The most evocative remembrances of the physical and social landscape of the home country were narrated by older first-generation Bangladeshis thinking back to their childhood and early-adult lives in Sylhet. The memories were undoubtedly sharpened by the contrast between what they recalled, often vividly, of their youthful rural milieu, and their subsequent working lives on British merchant ships or later in industries and low-status service jobs in England.



These memoryscapes covered several interlinked themes: the love and care they received from their family and kin; the air and its smells; the fresh food and fruits they savoured; the friends they played with in and out of school; the teachers they were taught by; the paddy fields, gardens and open yards around their modest houses; the ponds they bathed and swam in; playing in the rain and mud; and many other things. Each of these themes and topics was contained in several nostalgic narrative accounts. Below are a few typical examples.

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We start with Alim who, like most first-generation older migrants, had been living in England for many decades. In the following extract from his interview, he first gives a good description of the homestead that he remembers, and then moves on to highlight some more specific memories of his Sylheti childhood.

There used to be ponds, both in front and behind most of the houses in our village, but many have disappeared now. We use to bathe in those ponds, and sometimes we would start with one pond and then move to swim in another until we finished swimming in all the ponds. And when the ponds were running out of water in the dry season, we'd run to catch the fishes there . . . some of them we put in water tanks at home and fed them too . . . I had a cycle, an Indian one, and my cousin had one too, a British-made one, so we used to do cycle racing with each other on our way to school. After school, we played in the late afternoon, chasing one another, playing hide and seek.

For Siddik, below, the physical landscape of the village and its rural economy is palpable, as is his memory of the warmth and humour of the older villagers.

I remember hosting people at home, helping the labourers during the harvest in the Bengali new year, processing the paddies in our yard . . . watching people travel to and from the market. Touring the entire village is unforgettable, entering from one end and then walking past one house after another. People were more caring then, old people were very funny – there was this old grandmother, she used to joke with us all the time. We had mangos, berries and many other fruits, whatever was in season, from different households, and so many other things we did, and came back home before sunset.

According to Renu, a first-generation British Bangladeshi woman, the memories of the homeland, including specific micro-details of the local landscape, are felt if anything more strongly as time passes; and she spoke of these memories not so much in a tone of nostalgic regret, but almost as an expression of rejoicing:

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I hear from other people that one's country is one's motherland, but I feel this in real terms . . . I miss my country and my mother . . . The air, the water, and even the trees are still dear to me . . . I miss my home country every single day. Whether we live here in England for ten years or fifty, we will always miss our country because that's where our roots are.

However, these sylvan, peaceful memories of what is constructed as an idyllic childhood are not the whole story. Memory is also tied to important historical, political and personal struggles (Hua, 2005: 200). Whilst the earlier-arrived postwar migrants were settling in the UK, their homeland was experiencing massive political changes. Independence from Britain first placed Bangladesh as East Pakistan, but then a bloody war of renewed independence followed in 1971 to create the state of Bangladesh. Many of the older British Bangladeshis had powerful memories of those troubled years of violence and further partition. This is a small part of Kabir's long recollection about his early life:

I went to my village school and spent all my school years in Bangladesh. During the liberation war of 1971, I was a year 10 student and was preparing for the matriculation exam, similar to your GCSE exam here. When the war started, we witnessed the barbaric atrocities, me and my classmates. Friends were being chased by the Pakistani army and their Bangladeshi collaborators, and as we were relatively young males, we were eventually rounded up and captured, and tortured too. They looted and burned our village as well. Me and some of my friends managed to escape and cross the border; we had some training and went back to fight against them. I remember the terrifying death of one of my close friends.

Whatever profound political and socio-economic changes have happened over the past several decades, the British Bangladeshis still recite these memories, pleasant or otherwise, and are thereby encouraged to maintain strong transnational ties to their homeland. The ties are affective and symbolic, but also material, comprising remittances sent to support non-migrant family members, as well as physical visits to the key places of their remembered pasts. Indeed, the journeys are a reification of those memories. Especially when they are made on a regular basis, the visits are also being re-lived and re-made through the experiences of the present. In the next section, we examine these trips and the discourses surrounding them.

## **Visits ‘home’: generation and gender contrasts**

The visit home is a diasporic journey of short-term duration which creates its own memoryscapes of places, events, kinship relations, social customs and cultural impressions. As Brah (1996: 183–184) points out, the experience of these trips varies intersectionally: here we focus especially on the generational and gendered aspects, given that among our research participants there is less variation across the other intersectional modalities of ‘race’, class and religion.

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The central themes connected to most migrants’ journeys to their homeland are articulated through the memories accumulated from such visits, which in turn reveal various admixtures of nostalgia, shared histories, and reinforced or changed identities (Marschall 2017: 4). On the whole, as one might expect, the first-generation migrants feel more strongly about their country and maintain firmer connections to it than the second generation. For the first generation, migration to the UK was the most significant event in their lives; hence, as we saw in the previous section, they preserve vivid memories of the land, people and environment where they spent their formative years. Meanwhile, the first generation actively transmits these images and memories of the homeland to their British-born children, encouraging them to visit the country of their grandparents, receive the hospitality always on offer, enjoy the food and warmth, and experience the homeland’s ‘way of life’. Through this continual process of forwarding the memories of the homeland from one generation to another, the second generation is ‘trained’ to think about their ancestors and to remember how to behave on visits to the homeland.

### ***Timing and frequency of visits***



Existing studies of transnational and diasporic communities acknowledge that migrants and their descendants maintain multiple connections, affiliations and relationships across borders, binding together and giving meaningful life to these diasporic spaces and transnational social fields (e.g. Brah, 1996; Glick Schiller, 2010; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Among the familial, social, economic, political and cultural activities that migrants engage in across their transnational spaces, home trips are often mentioned, but rarely is systematic attention paid to their multiple nature, timing and frequency. The general impression, derived from studies in various global contexts, is that migrants visit their homelands, mainly their villages and towns of origin, around once a year for holidays (often coinciding with school holidays for family visits), and for special occasions such as weddings and religious festivals (see, e.g., Ali & Holden, 2006; Christou & King, 2014; Levitt, 2009; Mason, 2004; Stephenson, 2002; Vathi & King, 2011). Missing from these and other studies of visits is systematic detail on the temporalities and varied purposes of such visits.

What we know of the role of home journeys in sustaining the British Bangladeshi transnational community is accurately summed up by Zeitlyn (2015: 51):

The visit is a big event in the lives of most British Bangladeshi families; they are the source of careful preparation, planning and imagining for many months to raise the considerable amounts of money necessary to pay for the flights, gifts for relatives and expenses of the visit . . . Visits to Bangladesh are a crucial meeting place for families . . . 'Being there' and 'being seen there', reconnecting with the people and places of their ancestral villages and bringing relatives and neighbours up to date with developments in the family are crucial elements of the visit . . . Visits can also be about being there at key moments. Weddings, deaths, funerals and religious celebrations are all occasions where a visit might occur. Visits are arranged, where possible, to coincide with these events and in some cases the events are arranged with visits.

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Whilst our findings support every aspect of Zeitlyn's account, we also find that the Bangladeshi transnational social field is more intense and interactive than is commonly understood. We found that migrants visit their home country surprisingly frequently and for a whole variety of reasons; some planned, but others, by force of circumstance, unplanned and arranged at short notice. Naturally, the nature and motivation of the visits vary from one individual and family to another. Generally, family trips with children are more planned and relatively infrequent, but individuals, couples and groups of friends travel more frequently and even spontaneously. The flight schedules between London and Bangladesh are virtually fully booked all year round, and our informants in Sylhet told us how their friends, relatives, co-villagers and hired drivers are frequently heading off to the airports to collect 'Londonis'; British Bangladeshi visitors. The following interview exchange with Habib, a Sylhet-residing relative of a British Bangladeshi migrant family, provides typical insights:

*Farid:* On what occasions do they [migrants] visit Bangladesh? Is it just for special occasions?

*Habib:* Not always. Sometimes they come just for a visit, to meet their relatives, look after their houses, because sometimes they leave their houses locked up . . . and they come to check their condition . . . and to look after the things they have here and to solve any outstanding issues that arise in their absence.

*Farid:* Do they visit at any particular time of year?

*Habib:* What I have observed is that those who have kids going to school or college, they come during the school holiday time. But those who do not have these kinds of commitment come anytime. Sometimes, someone comes alone, depending on their need and the weather conditions here. For example, if they want to come just for a holiday, they try to avoid the rainy season and choose the winter time instead.

The weather, then, is a common criterion to consider for these visits. In other migration contexts, for example where migrants originate from Mediterranean countries, return visits take place in a warm, sunny, dry atmosphere of happy holiday relaxation, when the locals, too, are in festive mood. Examples include the cases of Greece, Cyprus, Turkey and Albania researched by the second author of this chapter (King *et al.*, 2011; King & Kılınç, 2014; Kılınç & King, [Chapter 12](#) in this volume; Vathi & King, 2011). Unfortunately, the main British school holidays coincide with the uncomfortably hot and rainy period in Bangladesh. Whilst some second-generation children seemed oblivious to this, others were not. Zeitlyn (2012, 2015: 52–57), who interviewed young British Bangladeshi children about their homeland visits, found many complaining about the heat, flies, mosquitoes and smells. We did not interview young children, but we did ask the adult second generation to recall their travel to Bangladesh when they were children. And some first-generation interviewees spoke of their offspring's reactions to summer family trips. Falguni, a first-generation middle-aged mother interviewed in Sylhet whilst visiting with her teenage children, recalled their reactions on this and other visits over the years:

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My children don't like it here very much because . . . they get bitten by mosquitoes . . . they really suffer here, you can't imagine. If we could have the summer holiday in December instead . . . My children can't go out in this extreme weather to meet the relatives.

By contrast, second-generation Nazrul had fond and mischievous memories of his own childhood visits. Here he recalls with affection two particular incidents:

Some of my best memories when growing up [were visits to] Bangladesh. You know, I remember, as a kid, I was smoking and my *mama* [maternal uncle] caught me and smacked the shit out of me [laughs] . . . I don't smoke now but, you know, some of my fondest memories.

. . .

When it's the monsoon season you have big *haors* [wetlands] . . . and I remember, once, we were going somewhere *noukay* [by boat] and it was raining and *eto batash* [very windy] so, what we did, we had an umbrella and turned it into a sail [laughter] . . . and the *nouka* [boat] was flying [laughs].

Although most visits are carefully planned, it is not uncommon for them to be arranged very quickly in response to an unexpected necessity, such as sickness, land/property matters or the need to accompany another person who cannot travel alone. For example, second-generation Johura had to squeeze time from her busy work schedule in London to take her elderly mother to Sylhet for an emergency visit:

My mother, she is 70 now . . . she has difficulties, she is not able to travel independently . . . She needed a wheelchair at the airport, she also needed support on the journey, because she gets confused. It's a long journey and it can be quite exhausting for someone who is elderly. It's also quite an emotional experience [for her].

Likewise, Nazrul had to immediately board a plane for two successive trips in order to visit his father who had retired back to Bangladesh, suffered a stroke and then died.

First he had a stroke, so as soon as he had the stroke I went there to visit him and then I came back . . . and then a couple of days later he passed away, and so I went back again.

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Nazrul's father illustrates an emerging migration pattern – the 'retirement return' of the first generation – which, although not very widespread, affects the ongoing transnational family dynamics of care and visiting. Naturally, as retirees are of mature or advanced age, they require regular care and perhaps also medication, and this can imply regular visits to Sylhet for the adult second generation.

A final reason why visits are often made with virtually instantaneous timing is to resolve legal issues which have suddenly arisen. First-generation Kabir was interviewed initially in London, and we quoted from this narrative above. Then, several months later, he popped up in Sylhet during the second stage of the fieldwork. He had to return at a day's notice to sign papers relating to a land donation. Here is the full story:

During our previous interview in London, I told you [speaking to Farid] that I had no plan to visit again this year. I had no wish to come. I even saw you off when you left for Bangladesh [to go on fieldwork there]. But, suddenly, some land issues arose. I had a shared piece of land not far from here, next to the road, which me and my cousin inherited from our grandparents . . . When the village elders were looking for land to build a new mosque, my cousin agreed to donate this piece of land. But he is not the sole owner; he only owns one-third of it. Yet he promised to donate it without seeking my permission. He then called me to inform me of this. I said to him: 'It's my land too. However, as you promised to donate it, I cannot insult you in front of them [the village elders]. So, how do you want to resolve this?' He said he would transfer his part-ownership of another piece of shared land to me in exchange, and I agreed to this. However, there is an urgent documentation process for all of this, and that is why I am here.

## ***The relevance of generation and gender***

Experiences and memories of visiting the (ancestral) home country vary considerably by gender and generation, even when these visits are *en famille*. Some of these differences are documented in the existing literature on British Bangladeshis. Gardner and Mand (2012) and Zeitlyn (2012, 2015: 52–61) provide insightful ethnographic observations on these family visits to Sylhet, focusing in their case especially on the children's perspective. We know from these and other studies that Bangladeshi society is very patriarchal and composed of patrilineal families. Compared to females, especially young females, males enjoy the relative freedom to go anywhere and do as they wish. Whilst most British Bangladeshi women travel to the homeland in the company of male relatives – husbands, fathers, family groups etc. – male migrants of any generation travel in the ways that they want or are deemed necessary – on their own, with family, siblings, cousins or in a group. British Bangladeshis with children tend to think carefully about when to take them, depending on the children's age and adaptability to the

Bangladeshi ‘home’ environment. Too young, and they do not appreciate it and might get sick; much older, when they are teenagers, and they are likely to get bored and become rebellious.

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Some aspects of the gendered experiences of young children visiting Sylhet are nicely captured in the fieldwork accounts of Zeitlyn (2012, 2015), although his participant observation evidence does not allow systematic, robust comparison. In one fieldwork vignette, described in both of his key publications, Zeitlyn (2012: 959–963; 2015: 58–61) observes the behaviour of two sisters, Nazrin (aged 6) and Shirin (11) as they visit the family farm with their parents and brothers, Rafique (9) and Tanvir (3). Whilst Rafique was able to join the local boys of the *bari* (the family homestead) and run around, play football, chase cows, climb trees and get muddy, Nazrin, who desperately wanted to join in (after all, she played football in England), was repeatedly hauled back by her ‘minder’ (her 16-year-old uncle) and consigned to the care of the *apa* (older sisters) who comforted her and oiled her hair. Shirin, on the threshold of adolescence, was even more carefully controlled, and not allowed to talk to men, only to the *apa* who were teaching her how to behave as a ‘good’ Bangladeshi girl. Meanwhile Tanvir, the youngest, was being spoilt by all the attention thrown at him and his behaviour deteriorated during the course of the visit.

As a ‘model’ of gendered sibling behaviour, this account of one family’s visit to rural Sylhet is probably fairly accurate, and no doubt was chosen by Zeitlyn precisely because of this. Yet the same author also gives other examples which subvert, or at least nuance, the above vignette. Thus we hear from Ishrat (girl, aged 11) who particularly enjoyed the fun and games at her cousin’s wedding (‘It was fantastic . . . we had a cake fight’) and the freedom of ‘playing outside 24/7’. But we also get to know of the behaviour of Saiful (boy, age not given) who refused to play with the local boys his age and who complained bitterly about everything – the hard beds, the food, the toilets, the lack of TV and so on.

Insights from our own data on the gendered nature of adult visits reveal similarly mixed reactions. On the one hand, women migrants are grateful for the relief from the heavy burden of family and household chores and paid work that the holiday visit brings. They are able to relax in the sisterly company of the local women. On the other hand, visiting women, like the local women, are subject to limitations on their spatial movements. Nazrul reported the following interaction with his wife about their visits to Bangladesh, sparked off by the media attention given to Nadia Hussain, the British Bangladeshi winner of the popular British TV cookery competition ‘The Great British Bake Off’:

You know, I look at my wife’s experience. Most Bangladeshi women that you talk to, about their experiences of [visiting] Bangladesh, they say it’s never been good, for a number of reasons. You know, I was watching this, hmm . . . this Bangladeshi girl Nadia Hussain, the Great British Bake Off; my wife made me watch that programme the other night. And the one thing that she [Nadia Hussain] said that really stuck out, on the TV programme, was that, since she was very young, ‘our father brought us kids to Bangladesh, every two years . . . But the only thing we ever saw was the village, we were never allowed out of our village’. And my wife said: ‘there, you know, that’s true, I had similar experiences’.

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Similar patterns of gendered, but also highly variable, reactions are evidenced from parallel studies carried out on family visits to Pakistan by Bolognani (2007), Cressey (2006) and Mason (2004). Meanwhile, Rytter (2010) describes a play, ‘A Sunbeam of Hope’, written and performed by a Pakistani community group in Copenhagen, which is a satirical account of a family visit to Pakistan. The play employs exaggerated stereotypes of the different generations and genders, to the great amusement of the audience, made up of Pakistani migrants. Let us quote just one fragment of the play to demonstrate its combination of insight and humour. The two teenage children are introduced to their grandfather, whom they have never met before. The boy is dressed in a hip hop outfit and has bleached hair; the daughter is more modestly dressed; neither speak the local language. As the grandfather approaches his grandchildren, he moves to greet them in the traditional manner, putting his hands on their heads. The children misread his gesture and respond by giving the old man ‘high fives’.

Our interview data, as stated earlier, is with the first generation and adult second generation. We have seen from examples given earlier that the first generation has stronger ties to the homeland than the subsequent generations. The first generation’s visits to their country of origin are all about re-experiencing the ‘place’ of home, catching up with their relatives and friends, and maintaining their properties and inheritance in a changing environment. For the second generation, the home trips have a somewhat different set of meanings, and often different itineraries too. First, they consider travel to Bangladesh more as a holiday destination – but one they are semi-obliged to choose because of the strength of family connections there. This means that, whilst they make the obligatory visit to the ancestral village or town, they are also more likely to take in other sites on their holiday itinerary. Yet, wherever they go, they experience a new socio-cultural environment and a new way of life, a contrast to the one they were brought up in. They experience – as they relate in their interviews – a new culture, generous hospitality of local people, authentic food and refreshments, and what they regard as genuine human warmth.

This contrast in traditions of hospitality between Bangladesh and Britain (and even among British Bangladeshis in Britain) was something that struck many second-generation participants. British-born Abul recounted his impression of this contrast:

To be honest, I love Bengali culture . . . especially the hospitality. For example, if you come to my home [in London] right now, I can offer you a cuppa, like a cup of tea and a biscuit, nothing else. Maybe I can offer you lunch, maybe; but it’s not from my heart. I am not going to offer you to stay at my home overnight . . . But if you go to Bengali society, the houses there, they are going to offer you food, tea, staying overnight . . . like they care about you from the heart.

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For the first generation, visits are more focused on their parental homes, but here too, the nature of visiting is changing. Some of the longer-established first generation now have two homes in Bangladesh, one in the ancestral village in the family compound, and another in Sylhet city or another big town. Visiting the village house and paying their respects to their relatives and the ancestors’ graves becomes important for those who choose to mainly stay in their city home. Having done everything else, they take the opportunity to travel around to visit various tourist attractions. Two of these stand out in the narratives. One is going to Jaflong, a



mountain resort area where the highlight is a boat trip to the waterfall. The other is Cox's Bazar, a southern coastal town close to the border with Myanmar, where they enjoy the long sandy beach, staying in nice hotels, fresh seafood, shopping and boat trips to the offshore islands.

### ***Of tensions, property disputes and being a 'Moo-Aloo'***

The generally positive memoryscapes of the homeland and visits there are nowadays being threatened by disputes around property ownership. Earlier we heard how Kabir got annoyed when his cousin donated some of their jointly owned land for a new mosque – a conflict that was quickly settled by trading some other shared-ownership land. But in other respects, these property disputes represent deeper structural cleavages in the long-term evolution of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in Britain. On the one hand, long-settled migrants in Britain have accumulated capital to invest in the home country, and in addition may have been bequeathed land by deceased relatives there. Many migrants, especially the first generation, have invested in businesses, purchased extra land and built 'nice' houses as a visible symbol of their material success. These houses are like 'anchors' in the homeland, used as a place to stay when visiting, and to be used as an inheritance for the second generation to maintain their ties to the homeland, and to pass them on to their children in turn. On the other hand, the home country has been through a fundamental political, social and economic transition, during which time the migrants have mostly been absent. They find that the country they once knew and loved, with its family solidarity, kinship ties and social attachments, has now changed.

The problems become manifest when migrants return to claim their inherited assets, when they want to sell property or when they want to purchase land and build new property. Others – the first generation – come back to Bangladesh to retire and so need to take back the care of their properties. Or the second generation wants to reclaim their inheritance after the death of their parents.

Most of the well-established Bangladeshi migrants in London have sent money to a Bangladeshi relative – typically a brother – to purchase land and properties for them. When the migrant returns to check, they find that the relative they gave the responsibility to make the purchase has put their name on the official registration documents too. Some relatives have gone even further, and substituted their name on the record of land owned by migrants, taking advantage of the latter's absence as well as the lax nature of updating the municipal records. In other cases, relatives have simply occupied the land/property of the absentee migrants and used them for their own benefit, or have even sold them on illegally to a third party. These are some of the problems that British Bangladeshis face when it comes to affirming or reclaiming the ownership of their assets.

The inevitable question arises: why not follow the proper legal process? There is no easy answer to that. The local people have better knowledge of the legal rules and how they can be



manipulated and ‘bent’ to their advantage in an overall system that is to some extent corrupt. They take advantage of the migrants’ absence and use delaying tactics in subverting the legal procedures. Migrants do not generally have the time or resources to be physically present to sort things out. Migrant participants are aware of their disadvantaged status in dealing with the Bangladeshi bureaucracy, and that they are considered as ‘Moo-Aloos’, a local term which literally means ‘sweet potato’ but whose hidden meaning is that they are too simple and disconnected to understand how business is done nowadays in Bangladesh. Whilst the first generation, mostly poorly educated, struggles to understand the complicated land laws and legal jargon that is used to conduct business, the second generation, although better educated, are even further removed from the Bangladeshi reality and may even lack much knowledge of the Bengali language. Neither do they understand, or want to engage in, the techniques of bribery often required to ‘get things done’.

The cultural construction of the Moo-Aloo is based on a combination of jealousy and admiration. Local people are very much aware that many of the British Bangladeshis who visit Sylhet – the *Londonis* – have acquired considerable wealth, at least by local standards. They have bought land and built large, status-enhancing houses in the villages. Visitors reinforce their status by distributing gifts to relatives and hosting festivals. We illustrate this lavish expenditure with an account from Abul, a second-generation British Bangladeshi who was about to embark on a three-week trip to Bangladesh. To give a bit more background, Abul is in his 20s and works in a computer store. His parents are now separated; they originate from different parts of eastern Bangladesh – his mother’s family from Sylhet, his father from Brahmanbaria in south-eastern Bangladesh. His brother has ‘returned’ to Dhaka.

I am buying lots of stuff, I spent nearly £7,000. For my brother I brought a Rolex, also iPhone . . . I am being introduced to two families . . . I have already sent two parcels by cargo and I am going to take 40kg of stuff with me . . . I have sent clothes, trainers, watches, headphones, biscuits, chocolate, that’s all. Oh, and some cosmetics.

In addition, the retail and leisure landscape of Sylhet has been transformed on the basis of the tourism market fuelled by visiting British Bangladeshis. New shopping malls in Sylhet city and in tourist resorts cater to the cash-rich visitors, and hardly at all to the locals, with their tiny disposable incomes. Gardner and Mand (2012: 980) write that these malls are a reassuring sign of modernity for visiting migrant families, who in other spaces are disturbed by the squalor of rural life. A particular location mentioned by many of our participants, especially those visiting with children, is ‘Dreamland’, an amusement park on the outskirts of Sylhet city, again created mainly for the *Londoni* market. This funfair is part of the migrant-tourist-visitor experience for many families. Interestingly, it is detached not only from the reality of Sylheti rural life, but also from the participants’ lives in London, where they do not visit expensive play parks on a regular basis.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered migration and visits ‘home’ as examples of the ‘time-placeness’ of mobility, infused with deep layers of meaning associated above all with memories of past times, places and experiences. The trajectories of the migrants’ memories are both very long and very wide, encompassing many things, places, people and events. As many other authors have also pointed out (eg. Levitt & Waters, 2002), the depth and strength of the relationship with the homeland vary significantly between the two generations studied here, and indeed within the generations across different time-frames. Hence, for the first generation, memories of their childhood in Sylhet are very distant in time, if not in place, from their experiences of the homeland on recent visits. Likewise, for the second generation living in London, memories of childhood visits are different from those they make as adults, perhaps taking their own children, the third generation, with them. A key finding of the research is that these home-country visits are not confined to summer holiday trips or special occasions such as family weddings, but take place more frequently, more spontaneously, at any time of the year and for a wider variety of reasons.

Across a wider conceptual plane, our chapter has brought together notions of migration, mobility (notably visiting friends and relatives, VFR), tourism and memory in an innovative analysis of past and present times and social landscapes. The migratory system created by the particular history of Bangladeshi migration, in this case to East London, can be regarded as an ‘ethnoscape’ defined by ethnic ties between origin and destination (cf. Appadurai, 1990, 1996); as a ‘transnational social field’ characterised by more or less intense social and kinship relations stretched over this long-distance migration (Glick Schiller, 2005); and as a ‘diasporic space’ à la Brah (1996) in which a sense of diasporic identity is maintained both by the condition of absence and exile from the homeland and by regular visits back and forth. Our focus on East London and Sylhet supports the contention of Phillips and Reyes (2011: 9) that long-distance migration and transnational networks de-centre the nation-state as the primary locus of cultural meaning. Mobility decisions are increasingly referenced to transnational kinship networks, bringing ‘significant changes in the cultural landscapes of belonging’.

Through our fieldwork and interview evidence, as well as detailed reference to cognate literature (notably Zeitlyn, 2012, 2015), we have documented the following memoryscapes of migration and visiting, each relating to a different time, age and migration:

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- the first generation’s memoryscapes of their early lives in rural Sylhet – these are bucolic images filled with positive nostalgia about school, playing in an amphibian landscape of ponds and fields, and friendly socialisation with other children and older villagers;
- the first generation’s memories of more recent visits to their homeland – these are shaped by reconnections with family and friends, generating a positive image of being a ‘successful’ migrant, but also evolving tensions over land and property ownership;
- the memoryscapes and experiences of young second-generation children on their family visits to the homeland – here we find the most contrasting images between boys’ and girls’ behaviour and between happiness and discovery on the one hand, and boredom and

complaints on the other;

- the second generation's more geographically diverse memoryscapes of such visits, which comprise not only the ancestral family home but also more touristic locations and experiences in Bangladesh – on the whole these are positive impressions of connecting to the Bengali culture of family hospitality and warmth.

Three issues suggest themselves for further research. The first picks up what we discussed in the previous subsection, namely the growing conflicts over property ownership and inheritances. This is a major concern for the harmonious evolution of the British Bangladeshi transnational community. Some migrants are sufficiently knowledgeable and flexible to cope with the legal wrangles. Others are struggling, depressed and losing hope, with obvious implications for their future relationship with the homeland. This key challenge for the future stands in contrast to the positive, even celebratory landscapes intoned above, but the combination of satisfaction and disillusionment is not unusual in studies of counter-diasporic mobilities (eg. Christou & King, 2014; Wessendorf, 2013). There is a role here for the home-country government to step in to help resolve the legal impasse by creating greater legal clarity and transparency and a more efficient local-level bureaucracy.

The second issue regards the possibility of permanent return migration. Thus far, rather few migrants have followed the example of Nazrul's father and moved back to the home country to retire; and even fewer second-generation Bangladeshis would consider a counter-diasporic move to the parental homeland for good. This is largely because the homeland offers far fewer employment and income opportunities, and has an inferior health and welfare system, when compared to the UK. It seems that Bangladesh is not yet at a stage where it is ready to follow the lead of other post-colonial migration countries, such as India or the ex-British colonies in the Caribbean, where return migration, including of the second generation, has been noted and documented (see, *inter alia*, Duval, 2004; Jain, 2010; Levitt & Waters, 2002; Potter, 2005; Potter *et al.*, 2005).

The final topic is based on the realisation that, within the transnational family and social space of an established migrant diaspora, VFR mobilities are potentially bi-directional. The very notion of VFR implies a reciprocity of the visits, so that both migrants and their non-migrant relatives and friends visit each other in both the homeland and the host country, switching roles as host and guest as they co-create the VFR transnational experience (Humbracht, 2015; Janta *et al.*, 2015; Wagner, 2015). Although the British Bangladeshi transnational social field is inherently unequal, particularly in respect of financial resources and access to tourist visas, visits in the 'other direction' are still happening, creating new and different memoryscapes, and these are now a focus of our ongoing research.

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